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House of Representatives Select Committee on Benghazi

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July 6, 2015

The Honorable Trey Gowdy
Chairman
Select Committee on the Events Surrounding
the 2012 Terrorist Attack in Benghazi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Documents released recently by the Benghazi Select Committee demonstrate that a Member of the Committee, a staffer on the Committee, or someone who has been given access to the Committee's documents inaccurately described to the press email exchanges obtained by the Committee in a way that appeared to further a political attack against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

On June 18, 2015, *Politico* ran a front-page story entitled "Benghazi Panel Probes Sidney Blumenthal's Work for David Brock." The anonymous source for this story appears to have been attempting to support a line of political attack that many Republicans have been making recently against Secretary Clinton, Sidney Blumenthal, Media Matters, and the White House. Unfortunately, the *Politico* reporter apparently relied only on "a source who has reviewed the email exchange" when she reported the following:

While still secretary of state, Clinton emailed back and forth with Blumenthal about efforts by one of the groups, Media Matters, to neutralize criticism of her handling of the deadly assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, sources tell POLITICO.

"Got all this done. ... Complete refutation on Libya smear," Blumenthal wrote to Clinton in an Oct. 10, 2012, email into which he had pasted links to four Media Matters posts criticizing Fox News and Republicans for politicizing the Benghazi attacks and challenging claims of lax security around the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, according to a source who has reviewed the email exchange. Blumenthal signed off the email to Clinton by suggesting that one of her top aides, Philippe Reines, "can circulate these links," according to the source. Clinton responded: "Thanks, I'm pushing to WH," according to the source.

The emails were not included in documents originally turned over by the State Department.¹

¹ Rachael Bade, *Benghazi Panel Probes Blumenthal's Work for David Brock*, Politico (June 18, 2015) (front page) (online version now includes a correction).

Now that the emails quoted in this story have been released, it is clear that this source provided the following inaccurate information:

- First, the source claimed that Secretary Clinton wrote “Thanks, I’m pushing to WH” in response to an email from Mr. Blumenthal on October 10. In fact, she did not make that statement in response to this email. Secretary Clinton was responding to a completely different email more than a week earlier, on October 1.
- Second, the source claimed that Secretary Clinton was responding to a suggestion from Mr. Blumenthal that Philippe Reines circulate links to four Media Matters articles that refuted the way the “right-wing media” was covering Republican statements about the Benghazi attacks. In fact, Secretary Clinton was responding to an email from Mr. Blumenthal forwarding an article from Salon.com reporting that Republicans were planning to claim inaccurately during the presidential debates that the White House had advance knowledge about the Benghazi attacks and failed to act on it. The article included no reference to Mr. Reines at all.
- Third, the source claimed that Secretary Clinton’s email saying “Thanks, I’m pushing to WH” was not turned over by the State Department. In fact, that email was turned over to the Select Committee by the State Department on February 13, 2015, marked with Bates number STATE-SCB0045548-SCB0045550. The Select Committee has had that email for four months.

It appears that this source fed *Politico* an inaccurate characterization of these emails and that *Politico* accepted this mischaracterization without obtaining the emails themselves. The source apparently took an email that was produced to the Select Committee in February, isolated Secretary Clinton’s statement about the White House, removed it from the original email exchange about the presidential debates, and then added it to a different email exchange involving Media Matters. The source then apparently misrepresented that the State Department had withheld this new hybrid document from the Select Committee.

Unfortunately, this is only the latest in a reckless pattern of selective Republican leaks and mischaracterizations of evidence relating to the Benghazi attacks.

In 2013, another source provided an inaccurate characterization of an email from National Security Council official Ben Rhodes, including words that simply were not there, in order to misrepresent the White House’s role in editing the intelligence community’s talking points. As CNN later reported, this mischaracterization “made it appear that the White House was primarily concerned with the State Department’s desire to remove references and warnings about specific terrorist groups so as to not bring criticism to the department.”²

Similarly, former Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa mischaracterized a State Department cable in 2013 by claiming that Secretary Clinton “outright denied security in her

² *CNN Exclusive: White House Email Contradicts Benghazi Leaks*, CNN (May 14, 2013) (online at <http://thelead.blogs.cnn.com/2013/05/14/cnn-exclusive-white-house-email-contradicts-benghazi-leaks/>).

signature in a cable, April 2012.”³ It was later revealed, however, that the cable had only a pro-forma stamp of her signature, like millions of cables that go out from the State Department every year. The *Washington Post* Fact Checker gave this claim “four pinocchios,” concluding that “Issa presented this as a ‘gotcha’ moment, but it relies on an absurd understanding of the word ‘signature’.”⁴

These abuses are reminiscent of those seventeen years ago, when the Speaker of the House, Rep. Newt Gingrich, demanded that the Chairman of the Committee on Government Reform, Rep. Dan Burton, issue an apology to the House of Representatives and fire his chief investigator for releasing inaccurate, selectively edited audio recordings during an investigation of Webster Hubbell. These tapes had been manipulated and provided to the press and the American people in order to cast an inaccurate and negative light on then-First Lady Hillary Clinton.⁵

In the Select Committee’s one-year progress report in May, you proclaimed: “serious investigations do not leak information or make selective releases of information without full and proper context.”⁶ Yet, it now appears that someone who was given access to the Select Committee’s documents leaked doctored information to the press in order to make unsubstantiated allegations against Secretary Clinton. Since you have repeatedly refused my requests for the Select Committee to adopt rules—including protocols governing the release of documents obtained as part of the investigation—it is unclear how you propose to prevent this type of abuse from happening again in the future.

Sincerely,



Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member

³ *Fox & Friends*, Fox News (Apr. 24, 2013) (online at www.video.foxnews.com/v/2323454879001/benghazi-report-takes-aim-at-state-department/?#sp=show-clips).

⁴ *Issa’s Absurd Claim That Clinton’s ‘Signature’ Means She Personally Approved It*, Washington Post (Apr. 26, 2013) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/issas-absurd-claim-that-clintons-signature-means-she-personally-approved-it/2013/04/25/58c2f5b4-adf8-11e2-a986-eeec837b1888b_blog.html).

⁵ *Burton Apologizes Over Hubbell Furor; Aide Departs*, Observer-Reporter (May 7, 1998) (online at www.news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2519&dat=19980507&id=3TpdAAAAIBAJ&sjid=KlsNAAAAIBAJ&pg=2839,911154&hl=en).

⁶ House Select Committee on Benghazi, *Interim Progress Update* (May 8, 2015) (online at www.benghazi.house.gov/sites/republicans.benghazi.house.gov/files/Interim%20Progress%20Update%2005-08-15.pdf).